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SOME EXPERIENCES OF AN IRISH R.M.

BY E. GE. SOMERVILLE AND MARTIN ROSS

NO. XII.—‘OH LOVE! OH FIRE!’

It was on one of the hottest days of a hot August that I walked over to Tory Lodge to inform Mr. Flurry Knox, M.F.H., that the limits of human endurance had been reached, and that either Venus and her family, or I and mine, must quit Shreelane. In a moment of impulse I had accepted her and her numerous progeny as guests in my stable-yard, since when my cook, Mrs. Cadogan, had given warning once or twice a week, and Maria, the spaniel whom my wife delighted to honour, had had—I quote the kitchenmaid—‘tin battles for every male she’d ate.’

The walk over the hills was not of a nature to lower the temperature, moral or otherwise. The grassy path was as slippery as glass, the rocks radiated heat, the bracken radiated horseflies. There was no need to nurse my wrath to keep it warm.

I found Flurry seated in the kennel-yard in a long and unclean white linen coat, engaged in clipping hieroglyphics on the ears of a young outgoing draft, an occupation in itself un-

favourable to argument. The young draft had already monopolised all possible forms of remonstrance, from snarling in the obscurity behind the meal sack in the boiler-house, to hysterical yelling as they were dragged forth by the tail; but through these alarms and excursions I denounced Venus and all her works, from slaughtered Wyandottes to broken dishes. Even as I did so I was conscious of something chastened in Mr. Knox's demeanour, some touch of remoteness and melancholy with which I was quite unfamiliar; my indictment weakened and my grievances became trivial when laid before this grave and almost religiously gentle young man.

'I'm sorry you and Mrs. Yeates should be vexed by her. Send her back when you like. I'll keep her. Maybe it'll not be for so long after all.'

When pressed to expound this dark saying Flurry smiled wanly and snipped a second line in the hair of the puppy that was pinned between his legs. I was almost relieved when a hard try to bite on the part of the puppy imparted to Flurry's language a transient warmth; but the reaction was only temporary.

'It'd be as good for me to make a present of this lot to old Welby as to take the price he's offering me,' he went on, as he got up and took off his highly-scented kennel-coat, 'but I couldn't be bothered fighting him. Come on in and have something. I drink tea myself at this hour.'

If he had said toast and water it would have seemed no more than was suitable to such a frame of mind. As I followed him to the house I thought that when the day came that Flurry Knox could not be bothered with fighting old Welby things were becoming serious, but I kept this opinion to myself and merely offered an admiring comment on the roses that were blooming on the front of the house.

'I put up every stick of that trellis myself with my own hands,' said Flurry, still gloomily; 'the roses were trailing all over the place for the want of it. Would you like to have a look at the garden while they're getting tea? I settled it up a bit since you saw it last.'

I acceded to this almost alarmingly ladylike suggestion, marvelling greatly.

Flurry certainly was a changed man, and his garden was a changed garden. It was a very old garden, with unexpected arbours madly overgrown with flowering climbers, and a flight of grey steps leading to a terrace, where a moss-grown sundial and ancient herbaceous plants strove with nettles and briars; but I

chiefly remembered it as a place where washing was wont to hang on black-currant bushes, and the kennel terrier matured his bones and hunted chickens. There was now rabbit wire on the gate, the walks were cleaned, the beds weeded. There was even a bed of mignonette, a row of sweet pea, and a blazing party of sun-flowers, and Michael, once second in command in many a filibustering expedition, was now on his knees, ingloriously tying carnations to little pieces of cane.

We walked up the steps to the terrace. Down below us the rich and southern blue of the sea filled the gaps between scattered fir-trees; the hill-side above was purple with heather; a bay mare and her foal were moving lazily through the bracken, with the sun glistening on it and them. I looked back at the house, nestling in the hollow of the hill, I smelled the smell of the mignonette in the air, I regarded Michael's labouring back among the carnations, and without any connection of ideas I seemed to see Miss Sally Knox, with her golden-red hair and slight figure, standing on the terrace beside her kinsman.

'Michael! Do ye know where's Misther Flurry?' squalled a voice from the garden gate, the untrammelled voice of the female domestic at large among her fellows. 'The tay's wet, and there's a man over with a message from Aussolas. He was tellin' me the old hairo beyant is giving out invitations——'

A stricken silence fell, induced, no doubt, by hasty danger signals from Michael.

'Who's "the old hero beyond"?' I asked, as we turned toward the house.

'My grandmother,' said Flurry, permitting himself a smile that had about as much sociability in it as skim milk; 'she's giving a tenants' dance at Aussolas. She gave one about five years ago, and I declare you might as well get the influenza into the country, or a mission at the chapel. There won't be a servant in the place will be able to answer their name for a week after it, what with toothache and headache, and blathering in the kitchen!'

We had tea in the drawing-room, a solemnity which I could not but be aware was due to the presence of a new carpet, a new wall-paper, and a new piano. Flurry made no comment on these things, but something told me that I was expected to do so, and I did.

'I'd sell you the lot to-morrow for half what I gave for them,' said my host, eyeing them with morose respect as he poured out his third cup of tea.

I have all my life been handicapped by not having the courage of my curiosity. Those who have the nerve to ask direct questions on matters that do not concern them seldom fail to extract direct answers, but in my lack of this enviable gift I went home in the dark as to what had befallen my landlord, and fully aware of how my wife would despise me for my shortcomings. Philippa always says that she never asks questions, but she seems none the less to get a lot of answers.

On my own avenue I met Miss Sally Knox riding away from the house on her white cob ; she had found no one at home, and she would not turn back with me, but she did not seem to be in any hurry to ride away. I told her that I had just been over to see her relative, Mr. Knox, who had informed me that he meant to give up the hounds, a fact in which she seemed only conventionally interested. She looked pale, and her eyelids were slightly pink ; I checked myself on the verge of asking her if she had hay-fever, and inquired instead if she had heard of the tenants' dance at Aussolas. She did not answer at first, but rubbed her cane up and down the cob's clipped toothbrush of a mane. Then she said :

'Major Yeates—look here—there's a most awful row at home !'

I expressed incoherent regret, and wished to my heart that Philippa had been there to cope with the situation.

'It began when Mama found out about Flurry's racing Sultan, and then came our dance——'

Miss Sally stopped ; I nodded, remembering certain episodes of Lady Knox's dance.

'And—Mama says—she says——'

I waited respectfully to hear what Mama had said ; the cob fidgeted under the attentions of the horseflies, and nearly trod on my toe.

'Well, the end of it is,' she said with a gulp, 'she said such things to Flurry that he can't come near the house again, and I'm to go over to England to Aunt Dora next week. Will you tell Philippa I came to say good-bye to her ? I don't think I can get over here again.'

Miss Sally was a sufficiently old friend of mine for me to take her hand and press it in a fatherly manner, but for the life of me I could not think of anything to say, unless I expressed my sympathy with her mother's point of view about detrimentals, which was obviously not the thing to do.

Philippa accorded to my news the rare tribute of speechless

attention, and then was despicable enough to say that she had foreseen the whole affair from the beginning.

'From the day that she refused him in the ice-house, I suppose,' said I sarcastically.

'That *was* the beginning,' replied Philippa oracularly.

'Well,' I went on judicially, 'whenever it began, it was high time for it to end. She can do a good deal better than Flurry.'

Philippa became rather red in the face.

'I call that a thoroughly commonplace thing to say,' she said. 'I dare say he has not many ideas beyond horses, but no



I MET MISS SALLY KNOX RIDING AWAY FROM THE HOUSE
ON HER WHITE COB

more has she, and he really does come and borrow books from me——'

'Whitaker's Almanack,' I murmured.

'Well, I don't care, I like him very much, and I know what you're going to say, and you're wrong, and I'll tell you why——'

Here Mrs. Cadogan came into the room, her cap at rather more than its usual warlike angle over her scarlet forehead, and in her hand a kitchen plate, on which a note was ceremoniously laid forth.

'But this is for you, Mrs. Cadogan,' said Philippa, as she looked at it.

'Ma'am,' returned Mrs. Cadogan with immense dignity, 'I have no learning, and from what the young man's after telling

me that brought it from Aussolas, I'd sooner yerself read it for me than thim gerrls.'

My wife opened the envelope, and drew forth a gilt-edged sheet of pink paper.

'Miss Margaret Nolan presents her compliments to Mrs. Cadogan,' she read, 'and I have the pleasure of telling you that the servants of Aussolas is inviting you and Mr. Peter Cadogan, Miss Mulrooney, and Miss Gallagher'—Philippa's voice quavered perilously—'to a dance on next Wednesday. Dancing to begin at seven o'clock, and to go on till five. Yours affectionately, MAGGIE NOLAN.'

'How affectionate she is!' snorted Mrs. Cadogan; 'them's Dublin manners, I dare say!'

'P.S.,' continued Philippa; 'steward, Mr. Denis O'Loughlin; stewardess, Mrs. Mahony.'

'Thoughtful provision,' I remarked; 'I suppose Mrs. Mahony's duties will begin after supper.'

'Well, Mrs. Cadogan,' said Philippa, quelling me with a glance, 'I suppose you'd all like to go?'

'As for dancin',' said Mrs. Cadogan, with her eyes fixed on a level with the curtain-pole, 'I thank God I'm a widow, and the only dancin' I'll do is to dance to my grave.'

'Well, perhaps Julia, and Annie, and Peter——' suggested Philippa, considerably overawed.

'I'm not one of them that holds with loud mockery and harangues,' continued Mrs. Cadogan, 'but if I had any wish for dhrawing down talk I could tell you, ma'am, that the like o' them has their share of dances without going to Aussolas! Wasn't it only last Sunday week I wint follyin' the turkey that's layin' out in the plantation, and the whole o' thim hysted their sails and back with them to their lovers at the gate-house, and the kitchenmaid having a Jew-harp to be playing for them!'

'That was very wrong,' said the truckling Philippa. 'I hope you spoke to the kitchenmaid about it.'

'Is it spake to thim?' rejoined Mrs. Cadogan. 'No, but what I done was to dhrag the kitchenmaid round the passages by the hair o' the head!'

'Well, after that, I think you might let her go to Aussolas,' said I venturously.

The end of it was that every one in and about the house went to Aussolas on the following Wednesday, including Mrs. Cadogan. Philippa had gone over to stay at the Shutes, ostensibly to arrange about a jumble sale, the real object

being (as a matter of history) to inspect the Scotch young lady before whom Bernard Shute had dumped his affections in his customary manner. Being alone, with every prospect of a bad dinner, I accepted with gratitude an invitation to dine and sleep at Aussolas and see the dance; it is only on very special occasions that I have the heart to remind Philippa that she had neither part nor lot in what occurred—it is too serious a matter for trivial gloryings.

Mrs. Knox had asked me to dine at six o'clock, which meant that I arrived, in blazing sunlight and evening clothes, punctually at that hour, and that at seven o'clock I was still sitting in the library, reading heavily-bound classics, while my hostess held loud conversations down staircases with Denis O'Loughlin, the red-bearded Robinson Crusoe who combined in himself the offices of coachman, butler, and, to the best of my belief, valet to the lady of the house. The door opened at last, and Denis, looking as furtive as his prototype after he had sighted the footprint, put in his head and beckoned to me.



'The misthress says will ye go to dinner without her,' he said, very confidentially; 'sure she's greatly vexed ye should be waitin' on her. 'Twas the kitchen chimney cot fire, and faith she's afther giving Biddy Mahony the sack, on the head of it! Though, indeed, 'tis little we'd regard a chimney on fire here any other day.'

Mrs. Knox's woolly dog was the sole occupant of the dining-room when I entered it; he was sitting on his mistress's chair, with all the air of outrage peculiar to a small and self-important dog when routine has been interfered with. It was difficult to discover what had caused the delay, the meal, not excepting the

soup, being a cold collation ; it was heavily flavoured with soot, and was hurled on to the table by Crusoe in spasmodic bursts, contemporaneous, no doubt, with Biddy Mahony's fits of hysterics in the kitchen. Its most memorable feature was a noble lake trout, which appeared in two jagged pieces, a matter lightly alluded to by Denis as the result of 'a little argument' between himself and Biddy as to the dish on which it was to be served. Further conversation elicited the interesting fact that the combatants had pulled the trout in two before the matter was settled. A brief glance at my attendant's hands decided me to let the woolly dog justify his existence by consuming my portion for me, a task he ably performed when Crusoe left the room.

Old Mrs. Knox remained invisible till the end of dinner, when she appeared in the purple velvet bonnet that she was reputed to have worn since the famine, and a dun-coloured woollen shawl fastened by a splendid diamond brooch, that flashed rainbow fire against the last shafts of sunset. There was a fire in the old lady's eye, too, the light that I had sometimes seen in Flurry's in moments of crisis.

'I have no apologies to offer that are worth hearing,' she said, 'but I have come to drink a glass of port wine with you, if you will so far honour me, and then we must go out and see the ball. My grandson is late, as usual.'

She crumbled a biscuit with a brown and preoccupied hand ; her claw-like fingers carried a crowded sparkle of diamonds upwards as she raised her glass to her lips.

The twilight was falling when we left the room and made our way down stairs. I followed the little figure in the purple bonnet through dark regions of passages and doorways, where strange lumber lay about ; there was a rusty suit of armour, an upturned punt, mouldering pictures, and finally, by a door that opened into the yard, a lady's bicycle, white with the dust of travel. I supposed this latter to have been imported from Dublin by the fashionable Miss Maggie Nolan, but on the other hand it was well within the bounds of possibility that it belonged to old Mrs. Knox. The coach-house at Aussolas was on a par with the rest of the establishment, being vast, dilapidated, and of unknown age. Its three double doors were wide open, and the guests overflowed through them into the cobble-stoned yard ; above their heads the tin reflectors of paraffin lamps glared at us from among the Christmas decorations of holly and ivy that festooned the walls. The voices of a fiddle and a concertina, combined, were uttering a polka with shrill and hideous fluency,

to which the scraping and stamping of hob-nailed boots made a ponderous bass accompaniment.

Mrs. Knox's donkey-chair had been placed in a commanding position at the top of the room, and she made her way slowly to it, shaking hands with all varieties of tenants and saying right things without showing any symptom of that flustered boredom that I have myself exhibited when I went round the men's messes on Christmas Day. She took her seat in the donkey-chair, with the white dog in her lap, and looked with her hawk's eyes round the array of faces that hemmed in the space where the dancers were solemnly bobbing and hopping.

'Will you tell me who that tomfool is, Denis?' she said, pointing to a young lady in a ball dress who was circling in conscious magnificence and somewhat painful incongruity in the arms of Mr. Peter Cadogan.

'That's the lady's maid from Castle Knox, yer honour, ma'am,' replied Denis, with something remarkably like a wink at Mrs. Knox.

'When did the Castle Knox servants come?' asked the old lady, very sharply.

'The same time yer honour left the table, and—— Pillilew! What's this?'

There was a clatter of galloping hoofs in the courtyard, as of a troop of cavalry, and out of the heart of it Flurry's voice shouting to Denis to drive out the colts and shut the gates before they had the people killed. I noticed that the colour had risen to Mrs. Knox's face, and I put it down to anxiety about her young horses. I may admit that when I heard Flurry's voice, and saw him collaring his grandmother's guests and pushing them out of the way as he came into the coach-house, I rather feared that he was in the condition so often defined to me at Petty Sessions as 'not dhrunk, but having dhrink taken.' His face was white, his eyes glittered, there was a general air of exaltation about him that suggested the solace of the pangs of love according to the most ancient convention.

'Hullo!' he said, swaggering up to the orchestra, 'what's this humbugging thing they're playing? A polka, is it? Drop that, John Casey, and play a jig.'

John Casey ceased abjectly.

'What'll I play, Masther Flurry?'

'What the devil do I care? Here, Yeates, put a name on it! You're a sort of a musicianer yourself!'

I know the names of three or four Irish jigs; but on this

occasion my memory clung exclusively to one, I suppose because it was the one I felt to be peculiarly inappropriate.

‘Oh, well, “Haste to the Wedding,”’ I said, looking away.

Flurry gave a shout of laughter.

‘That’s it!’ he exclaimed. ‘Play it up, John! Give up “Haste to the Wedding.” That’s Major Yeates’ fancy!’

Decidedly Flurry was drunk.

‘What’s wrong with you all that you aren’t dancing?’ he said, striding up the middle of the room. ‘Maybe you don’t know how. Here, I’ll soon get one that’ll show you!’

He advanced upon his grandmother, snatched her out of the donkey-chair, and, amid roars of applause, led her out, while the fiddle squealed its way through the inimitable twists of the tune, and the concertina surged and panted after it. Whatever Mrs. Knox may have thought of her grandson’s behaviour, she was evidently going to make the best of it. She took her station opposite to him, in the purple bonnet, the dun-coloured shawl and the diamonds, she picked up her skirt at each side, affording a view of narrow feet in elastic-sided cloth boots, and for three repeats of the tune she stood up to her grandson, and footed it on the coach-house floor. What the cloth boots did I could not exactly follow; they were, as well as I could see, extremely scientific, while there was hardly so much as a nod from the plumes of the bonnet. Flurry was also scientific, but his dancing did not alter my opinion that he was drunk; in fact, I thought he was making rather an exhibition of himself. They say that that jig was twenty pounds in Mrs. Knox’s pocket at the next rent day; but though this statement is open to doubt, I believe that if she and Flurry had taken the hat round there and then she would have got in the best part of her arrears.

After this the company settled down to business. The dances lasted a sweltering half-hour, old women and young dancing with equal and tireless zest. At the end of each the gentlemen abandoned their partners without ceremony or comment, and went out to smoke, while the ladies retired to the laundry, where families of teapots stewed on the long bars of the fire, and Mrs. Mahony cut up mighty ‘barm-bracks,’ and the tea-drinking was illimitable.

At ten o’clock Mrs. Knox withdrew from the revel; she said that she was tired, but I have seldom seen any one look more wide awake. I thought that I might unobtrusively follow her example, but I was intercepted by Flurry.

‘Yeates,’ he said seriously, ‘I’ll take it as a kindness if you’ll



SHE STOOD UP TO HER GRANDSON, AND FOOTED IT ON THE COACH-HOUSE FLOOR

see this thing out with me. We must keep them pretty sober, and get them out of this by daylight. I—I have to get home early.'

I at once took back my opinion that Flurry was drunk; I almost wished he had been, as I could then have deserted him without a pang. As it was, I addressed myself heavily to the night's enjoyment. Wan with heat, but conscientiously cheerful, I danced with Miss Maggie Nolan, with the Castle Knox lady's maid, with my own kitchenmaid, who fell into wild giggles of terror whenever I spoke to her, with Mrs. Cadogan, who had apparently postponed the interesting feat of dancing to her grave, and did what she could to dance me into mine. I am bound to admit that though an ex-soldier and a major, and therefore equipped with a ready-made character for gallantry, Mrs. Cadogan was the only one of my partners with whom I conversed with any comfort.

At intervals I smoked cigarettes in the yard, seated on the old mounting-block by the gate, and overheard much conversation about the price of pigs in Skebawn; at intervals I plunged again into the coach-house, and led forth a perspiring wallflower into the scrimmage of a polka, or shuffled meaninglessly opposite to her in the long double line of dancers who were engaged with serious faces in executing a jig or a reel, I neither knew nor cared which. Flurry remained as undefeated as ever; I could only suppose it was his method of showing that his broken heart had mended.

'It's time to be making the punch, Masther Flurry,' said Denis, as the harness-room clock struck twelve, 'sure the night's warm, and the men's all gaping for it, the craytures!'

'What'll we make it in?' said Flurry, as we followed him into the laundry.

'The boiler, to be sure,' said Crusoe, taking up a stone of sugar, and preparing to shoot it into the laundry copper.

'Stop, you fool, it's full of cockroaches!' shouted Flurry, amid sympathetic squalls from the throng of countrywomen. 'Go get a bath!'

'Sure yerself knows there's but one bath in it,' retorted Denis, 'and that's within in the Major's room. Faith, the tinker got his own share yestherday with the same bath, sthriving to quinch the holes, and they as thick in it as the stars in the sky, and 'tis weeping still, afther all he done!'

'Well, then, here goes for the cockroaches!' said Flurry. 'What doesn't sicken will fatten! Give me the kettle, and come on, you Kitty Collins, and be skimming them off!'

There were no complaints of the punch when the brew was completed, and the dance thundered on with a heavier stamping and a louder hilarity than before. The night wore on; I squeezed through the unyielding pack of frieze coats and shawls in the doorway, and with feet that momentarily swelled in my pumps I limped over the cobble-stones to smoke my eighth cigarette on the mounting-block. It was a dark, hot night. The old castle loomed above me in piled-up roofs and gables, and high up in it somewhere a window sent a shaft of light into the sleeping leaves of a walnut-tree that overhung the gateway. At the bars of the gate two young horses peered in at the medley of noise and people; away in an outhouse a cock crew hoarsely. The gaiety in the coach-house increased momentarily, till, amid shrieks and bursts of laughter, Miss Maggie Nolan fled coquettishly from it with a long yell, like a train coming out of a tunnel, pursued by the fascinating Peter Cadogan brandishing a twig of mountain ash, in imitation of mistletoe. The young horses stampeded in horror, and immediately a voice proceeded from the lighted window above, Mrs. Knox's voice, demanding what the noise was, and announcing that if she heard any more of it she would have the place cleared.

An awful silence fell, to which the young horses' fleeing hoofs lent the final touch of consternation. Then I heard the irrepressible Maggie Nolan say: 'Oh God! Merry-come-sad!' which I take to be a reflection on the mutability of all earthly happiness.

Mrs. Knox remained for a moment at the window, and it struck me as remarkable that at 2.30 A.M. she should still have on her bonnet. I thought I heard her speak to some one in the room, and there followed a laugh, a laugh that was not a servant's, and was puzzlingly familiar. I gave it up, and presently dropped into a cheerless doze.

With the dawn there came a period when even Flurry showed signs of failing. He came and sat down beside me with a yawn; it struck me that there was more impatience and nervousness than fatigue in the yawn.

'I think I'll turn them all out of this after the next dance is over,' he said; 'I've a lot to do, and I can't stay here.'

I grunted in drowsy approval. It must have been a few minutes later that I felt Flurry grip my shoulder.

'Yeates!' he said, 'look up at the roof. Do you see anything up there by the kitchen chimney?'

He was pointing at a heavy stack of chimneys in a tower

that stood up against the grey and pink of the morning sky. At the angle where one of them joined the roof smoke was oozing busily out, and, as I stared, a little wisp of flame stole through.

The next thing that I distinctly remember is being in the van of a rush through the kitchen passages, every one shouting 'Water! Water!' and not knowing where to find it; then up several flights of the narrowest and darkest stairs it has ever been my fate to ascend, with a bucket of water that I snatched from a woman, spilling as I ran. At the top of the stairs came a ladder leading to a trap door, and up in the dark loft above was the roar and the wavering glare of flames.

'My God! That's sthrong fire!' shouted Denis, tumbling down the ladder with a brace of empty buckets; 'we'll never save it! The lake won't quinch it!'

The flames were squirting out through the bricks of the chimney, through the timbers, through the slates; it was barely possible to get through the trap door, and the booming and crackling strengthened every instant.

'A chain to the lake!' gasped Flurry, coughing in the stifling heat as he slashed the water at the blazing rafters; 'the well's no good! Go on, Yeates!'

The organising of a double chain out of the mob that thronged and shouted and jammed in the passages and yard was no mean feat of generalship; but it got done somehow. Mrs. Cadogan and Biddy Mahony rose magnificently to the occasion, cursing, thumping, shoving; and stable buckets, coal buckets, milk pails, and kettles were unearthed and sent swinging down the grass slope to the lake that lay in glittering unconcern in the morning sunshine. Men, women, and children worked in a way that only Irish people can work on an emergency. All their cleverness, all their good-heartedness, and all their love of a ruction came to the front; the screaming and the exhortations were incessant, but so were also the buckets that flew from hand to hand up to the loft. I hardly know how long we were at it, but there came a time when I looked up from the yard and saw that the billows of reddened smoke from the top of the tower were dying down, and I bethought me of old Mrs. Knox.

I found her at the door of her room, engaged in tying up a bundle of old clothes in a sheet; she looked as white as a corpse, but she was not in any way quelled by the situation.

'I'd be obliged to you all the same, Major Yeates, to throw this over the balusters,' she said, as I advanced with the news that the fire had been got under. 'Pon my honour, I don't know

when I've been as vexed as I've been this night, what with one thing and another! 'Tis a monstrous thing to use a guest as we've used you, but what could we do? I threw all the silver out of the dining-room window myself, and the poor peahen that had her nest there was hurt by an entrée dish, and half her eggs were——'

There was a curious sound not unlike a titter in Mrs. Knox's room.

'However, we can't make omelettes without breaking eggs—as they say—' she went on rather hurriedly; 'I declare I don't know what I'm saying! My old head is confused——'

Here Mrs. Knox went abruptly into her room and shut the door. Obviously there was nothing further to do for my hostess, and I fought my way up the dripping back staircase to the loft. The flames had ceased, the supply of buckets had been stopped, and Flurry, standing on a ponderous crossbeam, was poking his head and shoulders out into the sunlight through the hole that had been burned in the roof. Denis and others were pouring water over charred beams, the atmosphere was still stifling, everything was black, everything dripped with inky water. Flurry descended from his beam and stretched himself, looking like a drowned chimney-sweep.

'We've made a night of it, Yeates, haven't we?' he said, 'but we've bested it anyhow. We were done for only for you!' There was more emotion about him than the occasion seemed to warrant, and his eyes had a Christy Minstrel brightness, not wholly to be attributed to the dirt of his face. 'What's the time?—I must get home.'

The time, incredible as it seemed, was half-past six. I could almost have sworn that Flurry changed colour when I said so.

'I must be off,' he said; 'I had no idea it was so late.'

'Why, what's the hurry?' I asked.

He stared at me, laughed foolishly, and fell to giving directions to Denis. Five minutes afterwards he drove out of the yard and away at a canter down the long stretch of avenue that skirted the lake, with a troop of young horses flying on either hand. He whirled his whip round his head and shouted at them, and was lost to sight in a clump of trees. It is a vision of him that remains with me, and it always carries with it the bitter smell of wet charred wood.

Reaction had begun to set in among the volunteers. The chain took to sitting in the kitchen, cups of tea began mysteriously to circulate, and personal narratives of the fire were already

foreshadowing the amazing legends that have since gathered round the night's adventure. I left to Denis the task of clearing the house, and went up to change my wet clothes, with a feeling that I had not been to bed for a year. The ghost of a waiter who had drowned himself in a boghole would have presented a cheerier aspect than I, as I surveyed myself in the prehistoric mirror in my room, with the sunshine falling on my unshorn face and begrimed shirt-front.

I made my toilet at considerable length, and, it being now nearly eight o'clock, went downstairs to look for something to eat. I had left the house humming with people; I found it silent as Pompeii. The sheeted bundles containing Mrs. Knox's wardrobe were lying about the hall; a couple of ancestors who in the first alarm had been dragged from the walls were leaning drunkenly against the bundles; last night's dessert was still on the dining-room table. I went out on to the hall door steps, and saw the entrée-dishes in a glittering heap in a nasturtium bed, and realised that there was no breakfast for me this side of lunch at Shreelane.

There was a sound of wheels on the avenue, and a brougham came into view, driving fast up the long open stretch by the lake. It was the Castle Knox brougham, driven by Norris, whom I had last seen drunk at the athletic sports, and as it drew up at the door I saw Lady Knox inside.

'It's all right, the fire's out,' I said, advancing genially and full of reassurance.

'What fire?' said Lady Knox, regarding me with an iron countenance.

I explained.

'Well, as the house isn't burned down,' said Lady Knox, cutting short my details, 'perhaps you would kindly find out if I could see Mrs. Knox.'

Lady Knox's face was many shades redder than usual. I began to understand that something awful had happened, or would happen, and I wished myself safe at Shreelane, with the bedclothes over my head.

'If 'tis for the misthress you're looking, me lady,' said Denis's voice behind me, in tones of the utmost respect, 'she went out to the kitchen garden awhile ago to get a blasht o' the fresh air afther the night. Maybe your ladyship would sit inside in the library till I call her?'

Lady Knox eyed Crusoe suspiciously.

'Thank you, I'll fetch her myself,' she said.

'Oh, sure, that's too throuble——' began Denis.

'Stay where you are !' said Lady Knox, in a voice like the slam of a door.

'Bedad, I'm best plased she went,' whispered Denis, as Lady Knox set forth alone down the shrubbery walk.

'But *is* Mrs. Knox in the garden ?' said I.

'The Lord preserve your innocence, sir !' replied Denis, with seeming irrelevance.

At this moment I became aware of the incredible fact that Sally Knox was silently descending the stairs ; she stopped short as she got into the hall, and looked almost wildly at me and Denis. Was I looking at her wraith ? There was again a sound of wheels on the gravel ; she went to the hall door, outside which was now drawn up Mrs. Knox's donkey-carriage, as well as Lady Knox's brougham, and, as if overcome by this imposing spectacle, she turned back and put her hands over her face.

'She's gone round to the garden, asthore,' said Denis in a hoarse whisper ; 'go in the donkey-carriage. 'Twill be all right !' He seized her by the arm, pushed her down the steps and into the little carriage, pulled up the hood over her to its furthest stretch, snatched the whip out of the hand of the broadly grinning Norris, and with terrific objurgations lashed the donkey into a gallop. The donkey-boy grasped the position, whatever it might be ; he took up the running on the other side, and the donkey-carriage swung away down the avenue, with all its incongruous air of hooded and rowdy invalidism.

I have never disguised the fact that I am a coward, and therefore when, at this dynamitical moment, I caught a glimpse of Lady Knox's hat over a laurestinus, as she returned at high speed from the garden, I slunk into the house and faded away round the dining-room door.

'This minute I seen the misthress going down through the plantation beyond,' said Crusoe outside the window, 'and I'm afther sending Johnny Regan to her with the little carriage, not to put any more delay on yer ladyship. Sure you can see him making all the haste he can. Maybe you'd sit inside in the library till she comes.'

Silence followed. I peered cautiously round the window curtain. Lady Knox was looking defiantly at the donkey-carriage as it reeled at top speed into the shades of the plantation, strenuously pursued by the woolly dog. Norris was regarding his horses' ears in expressionless respectability. Denis began to pick up the entrée-dishes with decorous solicitude. Lady Knox turned



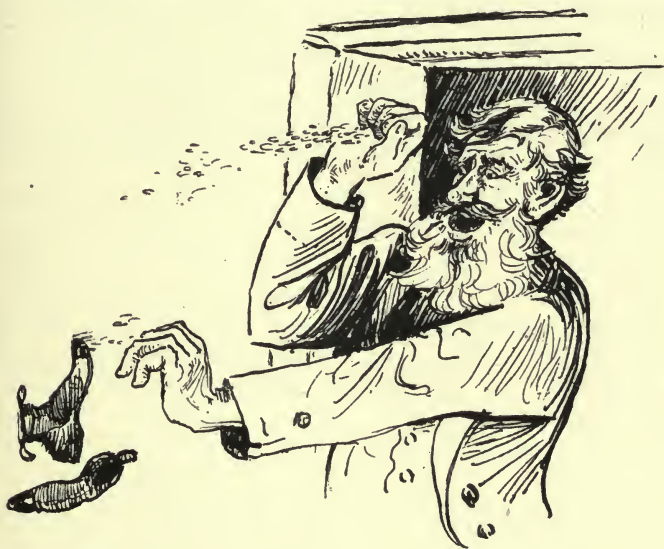
THE DONKEY-CARRIAGE SWUNG AWAY DOWN THE AVENUE

and came into the house; she passed the dining-room door with an ominous step, and went on into the library.

It seemed to me that now or never was the moment to retire quietly to my room, put my things into my portmanteau, and——

Denis rushed into the room with the *entrée*-dishes piled up to his chin.

‘She’s diddled!’ he whispered, crashing them down on the table. He came at me with his hand out. ‘Three cheers for Masther Flurry and Miss Sally,’ he hissed, wringing my hand up and down, ‘and ’twas yerself called for “Haste to the Weddin”’



EVEN FOUND RICE AND THREW IT

last night, long life to ye! The Lord save us! There’s the misthress going into the library!’

Through the half-open door I saw old Mrs. Knox approach the library from the staircase with a dignified slowness; she had on a wedding garment, a long white bernouse, in which she might easily have been mistaken for a small, stout clergyman. She waved back Crusoe, the door closed upon her, and the battle of giants was entered upon. I sat down—it was all I was able for—and remained for a full minute in stupefied contemplation of the *entrée*-dishes.

Perhaps of all conclusions to a situation so portentous, that which occurred was the least possible. Twenty minutes after

Mrs. Knox met her antagonist I was summoned from my room to face the appalling duty of escorting the combatants, in Lady Knox's brougham, to the church outside the back gate, to which Miss Sally had preceded them in the donkey-carriage, and found that the millennium had suddenly set in. It apparently dawned with the news that Aussolas and all things therein were bequeathed to Flurry by his grandmother, and had established itself finally upon the considerations that the marriage was past praying for, and that the diamonds were intended for Miss Sally.

We fetched the bride and bridegroom from the church; we fetched old Eustace Hamilton, who married them; we dug out the champagne from the cellar; we even found rice and threw it.

The hired carriage that had been ordered to take the run-aways across country to a distant station was driven by Slipper. He was shaved; he wore an old livery coat and a new pot hat; he was wondrous sober. On the following morning he was found asleep on a heap of stones ten miles away; somewhere in the neighbourhood one of the horses was grazing in a field with a certain amount of harness hanging about it. The carriage and the remaining horse were discovered in a roadside ditch, two miles further on; one of the carriage doors had been torn off, and inside it the hens of the vicinity were conducting an exhaustive search after the rice that lurked in the cushions.

FINIS



